

1986

# Architects in Power: Politics and Ideology in the Work of Ernst May and Albert Speer

Barbara Miller Lane

*Bryn Mawr College*, [blane@brynmawr.edu](mailto:blane@brynmawr.edu)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://repository.brynmawr.edu/cities\\_pubs](http://repository.brynmawr.edu/cities_pubs)

 Part of the [Architecture Commons](#), [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#),  
and the [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#)

---

## Custom Citation

Barbara Miller Lane, "Architects in Power: Politics and Ideology in the Work of Ernst May and Albert Speer." *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 17 (1986): 283-310. doi: 10.2307/204134.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. [http://repository.brynmawr.edu/cities\\_pubs/17](http://repository.brynmawr.edu/cities_pubs/17)

For more information, please contact [repository@brynmawr.edu](mailto:repository@brynmawr.edu).

Barbara Miller Lane

## **Architects in Power: Politics and Ideology in the Work of Ernst May and Albert Speer**

This article has a twofold purpose. First, by comparing some aspects of the lives and works of Ernst May and Albert Speer, it illuminates the special experience of architects in power in the twentieth century. Throughout history, architects have had a greater need for wealthy patrons than have other artists because of the great expense of buildings. And government buildings, because of their size and visibility, have always been the most attractive of commissions. Thus, architects have always been involved to some extent in politics, and have nearly always sought positions of power and influence. But never before the twentieth century, when the scale of government building has often transformed architecture into planning, and the relative democratization of politics has vastly increased the size of the audience, has the need for power among architects been so great. Both May and Speer held positions of authority which enabled them to make decisions as planners and as architects. Both were strongly supported by powerful patrons, but both also had to deal with the realities of politics and public opinion in a democratic, or at least a populist, era. I have written before about the work of both men, but have never attempted a direct comparison in order to examine the phenomenon of the architect in power.<sup>1</sup>

A second purpose is methodological. In the process of explaining the goals of their work to their patrons and to the public, May and Speer often made statements which were not entirely true. They described themselves as creators of an architecture

Barbara Miller Lane is the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities and Director of the Growth and Structure of Cities Program at Bryn Mawr College. She is the author of *Architecture and Politics in Germany, 1918–1945* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968; new ed. 1985). This article is dedicated to Franklin Lewis Ford, teacher and friend, on his sixty-fifth birthday.

© 1986 by The Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the editors of *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*.

1 Lane, *Architecture and Politics in Germany, 1918–1945* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968; new ed. 1985); *idem*, "Albert Speer," *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects* (New York, 1982), IV, 115–116.

which was uniquely expressive of a “new era,” and each defined this expression in both aesthetic and political terms. But the roots of their inspiration were more complex than either they, their patrons, or their audience believed. By illustrating this point, I hope to offer some guidelines for historians who wish to explore the relationships of architecture and politics in the twentieth century.

May was *Stadtbaurat* (municipal architect) and *Dezernent für Bauwesen* (overseer of city planning) in Frankfurt am Main from early 1925 to mid-1930. During those years he had almost absolute power over all architecture and urban design within the city. He exercised most control over projects supported by municipal funds, but, since his office was empowered to issue what we would call building permits, his influence on style was widespread. May’s office, during his term in power, had jurisdiction over such varied projects as the installation of storefront signs, plans for the revivification of the old city center, and the design of tombstones in Frankfurt’s graveyards. It is not surprising that some of his opponents accused him of “*Stildiktatur*” (aesthetic dictatorship).

The most constructive aspect of May’s administration, however, was the development of an extensive green belt plan for Frankfurt, and the planning of a series of new satellite cities. In the five years of his administration, approximately 10,000 housing units were erected, and plans were set forth for many more. His office also laid the basis for an ambitious regional plan, which has only achieved its full impact in the post-war period. The satellite towns which were completed between 1925 and 1930 were not just housing areas; they included new kinds of street layout and new community facilities of all sorts, including schools, shops, entertainment facilities, parks, and gardens. In writings of the time, May claimed to have created for Frankfurt not only a new dwelling form, which he thought would revolutionize human relationships, but also a model of a “new city.”

In 1930, May, together with a number of his staff, left Frankfurt for Moscow, hoping to build many “new cities” in Soviet Russia. By the time he discovered that Stalinist Russia was far less welcoming to his ideas than Weimar Germany had been, Adolf Hitler had come to power in Germany and had condemned all “art bolshevists,” including May. Leaving Russia in 1934, May

was unable to reenter Germany, and became a stateless person until 1945. During the war years, he took refuge in Kenya; thereafter he returned to Germany, settled in Hamburg, and awaited the call to achieve the “new city” on a large scale. But, by the 1950s, the specific circumstances that had lent appeal to his work in the 1920s were forgotten, and the call never came. During his last years, May was active in some important housing organizations in Germany and served occasionally as a planning consultant, but he never regained a position of real prominence. He died in 1970, an embittered man.<sup>2</sup>

Under Hitler, Speer held a position not unlike May's in Frankfurt, with the significant difference that Speer could, at times, aspire to control design in the Reich as a whole. From 1934, when the young Speer succeeded Paul Ludwig Troost as Hitler's principal architect, to 1942, when he took over the Ministry of Armaments and War Production, Speer occupied a position of unique power in the history of architecture. He was personally responsible for the most important of the new buildings and projects of the new Reich: the Nuremberg Party Congress Grounds, the New Chancellery in Berlin, and the replanning of Berlin. In addition, as the Führer's most favored architect and close personal friend, he was able, in theory at least, to name architects for any public building in Germany (under Hitler, during the depression, nearly all buildings were public), and to oversee and influence their designs as much as he wished. In practice, as so often in the Third Reich, Speer's power was contested by many other officials and by the other Nazi leaders, together with their favored architects. His power was also often undermined by the whims of Hitler himself. Nevertheless, Speer was able to set his stamp on a large number of buildings and projects, to the extent that many people then and now see his work as synonymous with Nazi architecture. Speer encouraged, and himself believed in, this identification: he saw himself as seeking a new style which would embody or represent the political ideals of the Führer and of the thousand-year Reich.

2 Justus Bueckschmitt, *Ernst May* (Stuttgart, 1963); Reginald R. Isaacs, “Ernst May,” *Macmillan Encyclopedia*, III, 126. On May's reception in Russia and on the general development of Soviet architecture and planning, see Anatole Kopp, *Town and Revolution: Soviet Architecture and City Planning, 1917–1935* (New York, 1970); *idem*, *L'architecture de la période stalinienne* (Grenoble, 1978). My remarks on May's last years are based on personal interviews in 1960, and correspondence thereafter.

Because of his role as minister under Hitler, his imprisonment for war crimes at Spandau (1946–1966), and his series of apologies and public appearances after his release from Spandau, Speer is far better known as a political figure and as an architect than May. His career is still the subject of bitter debate in Germany and elsewhere. Speer himself, in his writings and in his many television appearances, was often unable to separate his architecture from his role as Hitler's confidante and, ultimately, as one of the most powerful Nazi officials in the German war effort. Thus it is not surprising that public debate about the merits of Speer-like architecture is often mired in pro- or anti-Nazi denunciations. This tendency to see Speer's architecture as uniquely representative of Hitler's government has become a particular problem recently, when post-modernist architects have increasingly felt a fondness for a historicist architecture somewhat akin to Speer's. I do not discuss Speer's architecture without relation to his politics, but I show that the relationship between the two was more complicated than many people think. I restrict my discussion almost entirely to the years when Speer served Hitler as an architect, rather than as a minister.

The careers of May and Speer can be viewed sequentially, in order to see how and for what ends they used their unusually powerful positions. Before he headed the Frankfurt building administration, May (1886–1970) had been a designer of small housing developments, known in German as *Siedlungen* (colonies). May had spent some of his early career working in England with Raymond Unwin, one of the leading architects of the garden city movement. In the early 1920s, May's housing designs still resembled Unwin's: small, village-like dwellings, with steeply pitched roofs. May's city planning continued to display the influence of garden city ideas throughout his career, but his architecture, by 1925, had undergone a transformation into what would soon be known as the International Style.

The International Style, as defined first by Walter Gropius at the Bauhaus, and then later by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson at the Museum of Modern Art show of 1932, was an austere, cubic architecture, altogether devoid of historical references. Characterized by a balanced asymmetry, unlike most of the Western architectural tradition; by thin skin-like surfaces,

often (but not always) executed in reinforced concrete; and by extensive window areas set flush in the surface of the building and often bearing a considerable burden of abstract patterning, the new style was startling in appearance. It appeared particularly startling in Frankfurt am Main, one of Germany's oldest, most history-laden cities.

Frankfurt's origins begin with the Romans and the Franks. One of Germany's leading financial centers since the later Middle Ages, it was the site of momentous events in German history: the election and coronation of the Holy Roman Emperors on the Römerberg; the early declaration of adherence to a reformed religion in 1530, near the Lutherecke; and the framing of a constitution and parliament for a united Germany in 1848, at the Paulskirche, which, though unsuccessful, left some imprint on the Bismarckian constitution and remained as a memory of hopes for national union under liberal auspices. Historically, Frankfurt was Roman, Imperial, Protestant, nationalistically German, wealthy, and liberal. Although it was absorbed into Germany via Prussian hegemony, the memory of these various traditions remained. The long and complex history of the city left a physical legacy as well: the small medieval core of the city was ringed by lavish parks and boulevards dating from early modern times. These parklands and newer residential areas were in turn ringed by neighboring towns which, with the progress of industrialization, began to grow inward toward the old city.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Frankfurt's wealth was augmented by the growth of late industrial organization there; the city had come to be one of the principal sites of Germany's chemical and electrical industries. It was also, by that time, an important center of Social Democratic influence and an early locus of working-class housing reform movements. Frankfurt entered the Weimar Republic, therefore, with a population that was conscious of its history, but also extremely cosmopolitan, liberal, relatively well-to-do, and receptive to social reform. It had also recently entered a period of extremely rapid growth. As May grew up in Frankfurt, he must have been aware of these different traditions and contexts.

In 1924, Ludwig Landmann, city councillor and head of the office of housing policy in Frankfurt, became mayor. Landmann, who has been described by his biographer as more of a technocrat

than a politician, was nevertheless a leading member of the Democratic Party in Frankfurt, and was brought to power by an overwhelming majority of Democrats and Social Democrats in the municipal elections. His stated program was the modernization of all aspects of municipal functions, but especially the improvement of transportation and housing conditions. He also planned and achieved the incorporation of many outlying towns and suburbs into an enlarged metropolitan area. In 1925, Landmann combined all of the older city offices concerned with planning and housing, extended them to the enlarged metropolitan area, and appointed May as the director of the whole. At this time May was known as a designer of public housing in Breslau, and as a recent convert to the architectural ideas of the Bauhaus. When May was called to Frankfurt, however, he had not yet executed a significant number of the buildings in the new style, nor had it been widely employed elsewhere in Germany.<sup>3</sup>

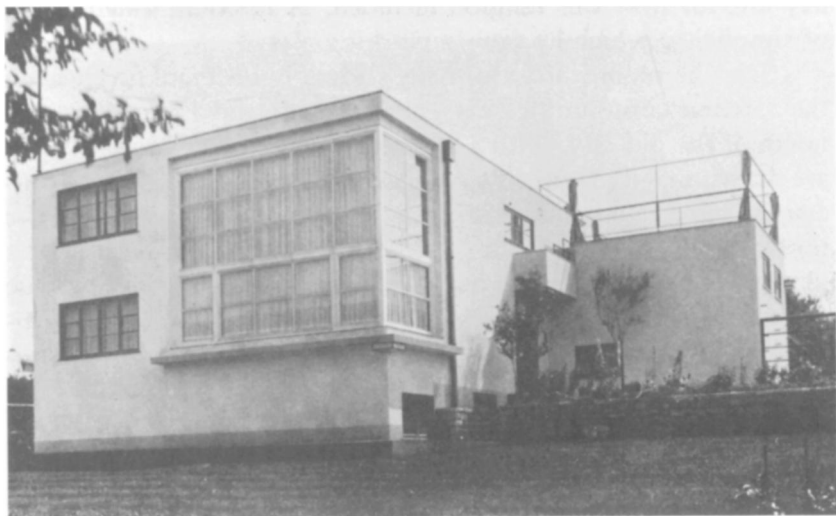
Landmann charged May with the task of improving transportation conditions within the city while retaining as much as possible of the historic character of its inner precincts. Above all, however, he was asked to develop a vast public housing program and to plan for current and future growth. May and Landmann began, shortly after the new appointment, to speak of the creation, in architecture and planning, of a "New Frankfurt," an embodiment of a "new era," suited to fast-moving traffic, high technology, and social reform.<sup>4</sup>

May's architectural response to his task can be summarized by a brief look at the house which he designed for himself in Frankfurt in 1926 (Fig. 1). An austere cubic structure, executed in white stucco to resemble reinforced concrete, it looks like a module for prefabricated mass housing. Inside, the walls are bare plaster, also white; there are no moldings to obscure the sharp, apparently machine-made edges. Furnishings are sparse and geometric appearing, and the whole is flooded with light. Tillich said

3 Dieter Rebentisch, *Ludwig Landmann, Frankfurter Oberbürgermeister der Weimarer Republik* (Wiesbaden, 1975), 306, 133; Lane, *Architecture and Politics*, 89–90.

4 See *Das Neue Frankfurt* (Frankfurt am Main, Nov. 1926–July, 1931), esp. Landmann, "Zum Geleit," I (1926), 1–2. May was sole editor until 1927, and then shared the editorial tasks with others until 1931. Subtitles varied. From 1931 to 1934 (when it was closed down by the Nazis) the magazine continued as *Die Neue Stadt*, edited by Joseph Gantner. Many issues are reprinted in Juan Rodríguez-Lores and Günter Uhlig (eds.), *Das Neue Frankfurt/Die Neue Stadt* (Aachen, 1977).

**Fig. 1** Exterior and Interior Views of May's House, 1926.



**SOURCE:** Walter Müller-Wulckow, *Deutsche Baukunst der Gegenwart* (Leipzig, 1929), pt. II, 42, 45.



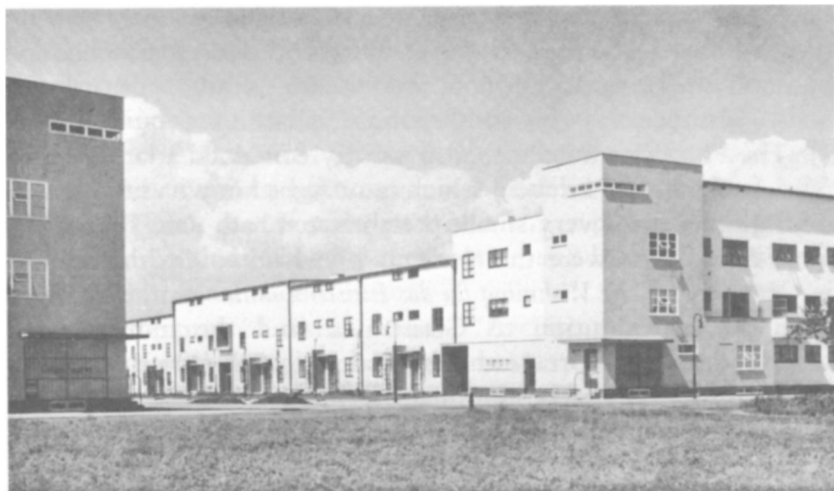
of this kind of architecture that it represented a religion of everyday life; for May this religion included, in addition, a deification of simplicity, which he saw as working class.<sup>5</sup>

But the main impact of May's ideas upon Frankfurt was in the satellite communities designed by him and his staff to the north of the old city, with a greenbelt in between. My examples are drawn mainly from two of these satellite communities, Römerstadt and Praunheim, both located in the Nidda valley to the northwest of the city. From a distance, these communities look like piled up and strung out versions of the housing module described above. To our eyes, accustomed to Moshe Safdie Habitats and the megastructural urban visions of the Japanese Metabolists, they are not so shocking, but in 1925 they looked like alien visitors at the edge of the older city. On closer examination it becomes clear that the kind of patterning which in most buildings of the International Style was created by the massing of a single building, or just by fenestration on a single facade, was in Frankfurt extended to whole communities (Fig. 2). Each community was built up from simple geometric forms to a series of high points, creating an overall asymmetrical balance which gave the community stylistic coherence. This design coherence was reinforced by color: different streets were painted in contrasting colors, so that the overall effect was of a kind of three-dimensional Mondrian, writ very large. The street pattern reinforced the integrity of each community, which was bordered by broad, trolly-served boulevards, linking it to the old city. Within each community, winding and increasingly narrow streets and footpaths created a unifying pattern (Fig. 3).

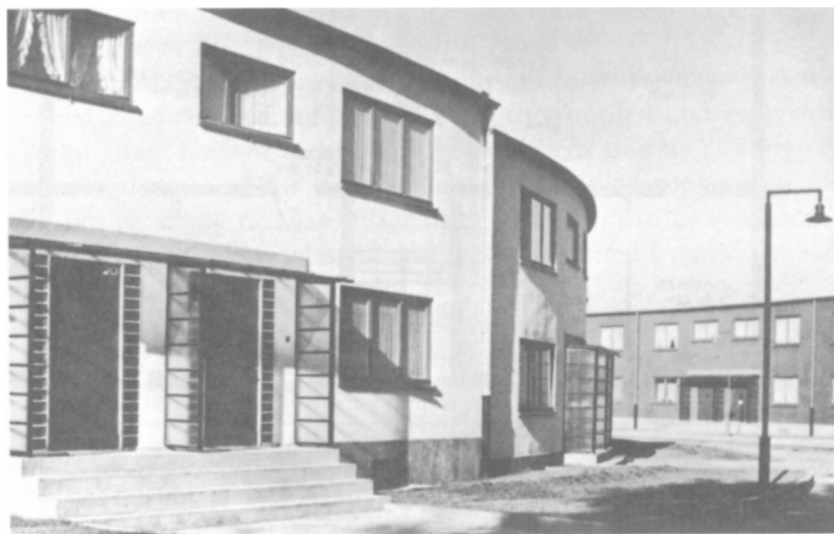
The dwellings in these new communities were very small. Reflecting the lingering effects of his garden city training, May chose to build not the more economical high-rise structures with which others in Germany were beginning to experiment, but low-rise buildings, never more than four stories, and as often as possible only two or three. One corollary of the rather lavish use of land necessitated by this practice was to make the dwelling units small in order to keep them economical. Since these dwellings were also intended from the start to provide low-cost housing for

5 Paul Tillich, "Kult und Form," *Die Form*, V (1930), 578–583.

**Fig. 2** Siedlung Hohenblick: Color, Massing, and Patterning Unite Two Blocks.



**Fig. 3** Siedlung Praunheim: Narrow Streets Create a Village-like Effect.

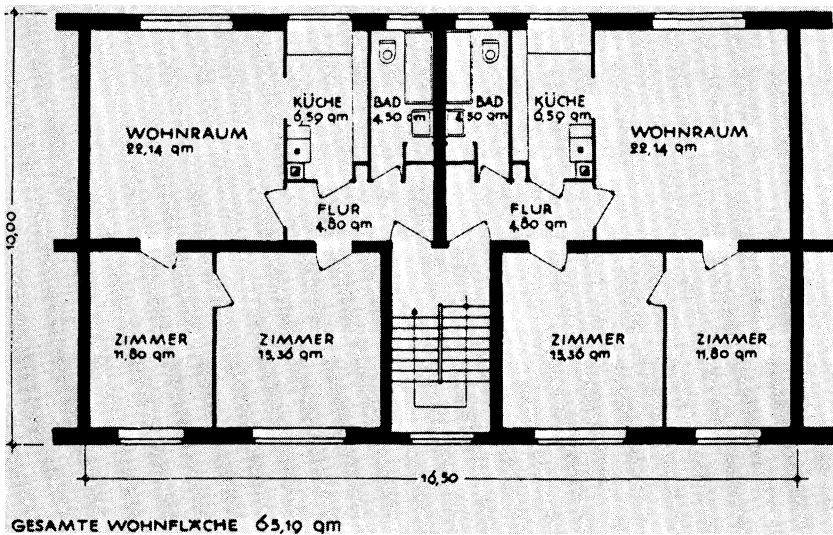


SOURCES: Lane, *Architecture and Politics*, Figs. 54, 56.

the working classes, an additional impetus for cost-efficient planning was introduced.

Many of the Frankfurt dwellings consisted of only two or three rooms: a main room convertible for both dining and sleeping, and one or two additional rooms with folding beds or bunk beds. Furniture was very simple, and much of it was built in (Fig. 4). The Frankfurt dwellings also usually contained a largely prefabricated pullman kitchen, which came to be known as the *Frankfurter Küche*, and a very small, prefabricated bath unit, the *Frankfurter Bad*. These were the elements of what came to be known in Germany as *Die Wohnung für das Existenzminimum*, the minimal dwelling, the solution to Germany's (and the industrialized world's) housing shortage and to the demographic crisis then seen to be approaching. The minimal dwelling, and May's solutions for it, were widely appreciated, and formed the subject of the first and second organizational meetings of CIAM (*Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne*) in 1928 and 1929. May was one

Fig. 4 Plan of Minimal Dwelling.



of the principal founders of the organization, which has been identified by historians almost entirely with Le Corbusier.<sup>6</sup>

For May, and for many others in Germany in the mid-1920s, minimalism in housing was not just a response to economic necessity, but was also an act of faith. As Taut put it in 1924, "only in freedom from disorder can the personality develop freely." The simplicity of new kinds of dwelling design would, he said, produce a new "mental attitude, more flexible, simpler, and more joyful." Taut's words were part of a larger plea for a "spiritual revolution" aided by a new architecture and by the machine and industrial production.<sup>7</sup>

May expressed similar views: "Architecture has left behind it the path of decadent imitation and now recognizes the laws of form appropriate to our time. . . . The altered spiritual attitude of mankind has resulted in a new dwelling form . . . [in] the crystal clear, often intentionally humble, spatial arrangements of modern architecture." And, "Our co-workers in Frankfurt have drawn together in a philosophy of building . . . [intended] to provide housing for the masses. . . . They seek . . . architectural and planning goals that grow out of our own era. They know that the forms of Frankfurt's housing not only succeed in embodying a new style, but also that their labors are essential as milestones on the road toward an architecture which is specifically expressive of the twentieth century."<sup>8</sup>

For May, Taut, and others, the minimal dwelling meant a rejection of *things*, a concentration on the simplest and most universal *forms*, and the erection into an aesthetic dogma of a way of life simple enough for the poor and therefore appropriate for all. Ironically, many of May's dwellings turned out to be too expensive for the working classes, and were populated by middle-class intellectuals and professionals.

Apart from these innovative dwelling designs, the Frankfurt *Siedlungen* were held together formally by overall massing and pattern, and by a complex street pattern which was both urbane

6 News item, *Die Form*, V (1929), 124; May, "Kleinstwohnungen," *Zentralblatt der Bauverwaltung* (May 8, 1929), 297-300; *idem*, "Die Wohnung für das Existenzminimum," *Das Neue Frankfurt*, IV (1929), 111-114.

7 Bruno Taut, *Die neue Wohnung* (Leipzig, 1924), 104, 90. See also Lane, *Architecture and Politics*, 66.

8 May, "Das neue Frankfurt," *Das Neue Frankfurt*, I (1926), 2-11, 4; *idem*, "Grundlagen der Frankfurter Wohnungsbaupolitik," *ibid.*, III (1928), 113-125.

(on the broad boulevards) and neighborly (on the smaller streets). Each settlement also included a variety of community facilities. In addition to shops, churches, restaurants, and central laundries, innovative educational institutions were incorporated into nearly every development. Martin Elsaesser's schools in Praunheim and elsewhere implemented the ideas of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi and of more recent educational reformers, such as Hermann Lietz, by emphasizing manual labor, outdoor gymnastics, and training in horticulture as part of their curriculum. One *Siedlung* included a community building which housed a pre-school day care center; others had rooftop nurseries for infants.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, each *Siedlung* had gardens. Row houses had their own gardens to the rear, and apartment dwellings had individual garden plots grouped together. The gardens were originally conceived as truck gardens, for raising fruits and vegetables. In a few cases, additional large plots were set aside nearby, so that larger crops could be cultivated. Surrounding the gardens, lying behind the rows of buildings, were parks: parks for playing fields, parks with romantic walks along the Nidda River, adapted from a long tradition of English landscape design. And, leading down from the main boulevard of Römerstadt, a large swath of open land served as a sheepfold. The shocking appearance of the grazing sheep next to the abstract geometry of the housing highlights some of the tensions and ambiguities that lay beneath the surface of May's "new architecture" for a "new Frankfurt."

The imagery of May's architecture and urban design was not merely that of a socially conscious or even socialist housing reform. The layout of the new communities depended partly on the tradition of broad boulevards developed in Frankfurt from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, and partly on the narrow, winding streets of the oldest parts of the late medieval inner city. The greenbelt arrangement was related to the British garden city movement and to its German offshoots of the early twentieth century; the sheepfold and the park paths had a similar origin. The prominence of gardens, particularly the larger scale truck gardens, demonstrated the thinking of Adolf Damaschke, an early

9 On educational institutions in the new Frankfurt, see Städtisches Hochbauamt Frankfurt am Main (eds.), *Frankfurter Schulbauten* (Frankfurt am Main, 1929); Fritz Wichert, "Die neue Baukunst als Erzieher," *Das Neue Frankfurt*, III (1928), 233–235; May, "Die Architektur der neuen Schule," *ibid.*, 225–233.

twentieth-century land reformer of considerable interest to the Nazis, who believed that each municipality should hold large areas free for cultivation in order to ensure food and health to future generations. A consultant in the planning of the Nidda Valley development was Leberecht Migge, a leading landscape architect of the 1920s and a disciple of Damaschke; Migge's ideas came rather close to Nazi *Blut und Boden* theories.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, May's ideas as realized at Frankfurt were a mixture of historic references to Frankfurt itself, garden city and English landscape traditions, reformist central European educational theories, some authors of which were politically very conservative, German land reformers of whom the same could be said, community organization ideas of a generally left-wing stamp, a working-class aesthetic of a sort, and a particularly rarified version of avant-garde art. The Frankfurt housing of the later 1920s uniquely illustrates the cauldron of conflicting ideas and political allegiances which characterized the Weimar Republic. But what does it tell us about the architect in power?

Most of us will admire the accomplishments of May in Frankfurt, even though we may realize that they could not have been achieved, in a democracy, without a very strong authority—stronger in fact than most democracies are willing to allow their architects and planners. May's powers were more akin to those of André Le Nôtre and Baron Georges Eugène von Haussmann than Edmund Bacon; indeed, for the term of his office, he had a more independent authority than any past architect dependent upon the whim of an absolute monarch. May himself took this authority for granted: it was necessary in order to achieve what he wanted to achieve, and nothing less would have done. And what he wanted to achieve, he said, was not merely a solution to Frankfurt's housing problems, but a new community, in which a new architecture would have an educational effect on people's lives, and on their relations to one another. He believed that architecture shapes human beings, their beliefs, and their society, and he saw no difficulty in the notion of imposing the forms of

10 Walter Creese, *The Search for Environment: the Garden City Before and After* (New Haven, 1966); *idem*, *The Legacy of Raymond Unwin* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967); Kristiana Hartmann, *Deutsche Gartenstadtbewegung: Kulturpolitik und Gesellschaftsreform* (Munich, 1976); Leberecht Migge, "Grünpolitik in Frankfurt am Main," *Der Städtebau*, XXIV (1929), 37–47; Christiane C. Collins, "Leberecht Migge," *Macmillan Encyclopedia*, III, 195–196.

a new society on people for their own good. He was content to be a dictator.<sup>11</sup>

May felt obligated, by virtue of his appointment in Frankfurt, to join a political party for the first time in his life. Inspired by the Fabian ideals that he had learned to admire in England, he entered the Social Democratic Party in 1925. Like so many of his generation, May was extremely naive about practical politics. He liked Mayor Landmann, and he shared the idea of many avant-garde artists of the time that artists had a special role to play in the post-war years in helping to bring about a spiritual revolution. He was glad to have his designs sponsored by a socially conscious municipal government; he would have been equally glad to have had them realized in Soviet Russia. Whether, if given the opportunity, he would have accepted the patronage of Hitler, we cannot know; in any case the opportunity never arose, and could not (given Hitler's aesthetic preferences) have arisen. But if May had been asked whether, in retrospect, the presence within his work of right-wing as well as left-wing influences troubled him, I think he would have said no. Nor do I think it would have bothered him to have been told that his work retained links to the past, as well as previews of the near future. May believed that he had assembled talent under the rubric of his own vision—that this vision was absolute and in a sense unrelated to specific political circumstances. Most architects, fundamentally, share this attitude. The ultimate sources of their creation is personal, and—to them—absolute. Most architects, therefore, like power, and its source is less important than the extent to which it aids in the realization of their aims.<sup>12</sup>

Speer (1908–1981), a far less complicated figure than May, and a poorer and less interesting architect, was a young and relatively unsuccessful architect in Berlin during the depression years. He held a good teaching post as assistant to his mentor, Heinrich Tessenow, at the Berlin Technische Hochschule, but commissions to build were unobtainable. In the politically volatile atmosphere of Berlin at the beginning of the 1930s, Speer joined the Nazi

11 May, "Das soziale Moment in der neuen Baukunst," *Das Neue Frankfurt*, III (1928), 81–87. It should be noted, however, that May's opponents were relatively few before 1928, and that he continued to be well liked by most residents of the city even after 1930.

12 Rebentisch, *Landmann*, 133.

Party. Soon, he received from the local party leaders some interior decoration work and a few other minor commissions. The decisive turning point in Speer's career came as a result of a personal meeting with Hitler in July, 1933; Speer was apparently genuinely mesmerized by the magnetism of the Führer. Hitler, in turn, was attracted by Speer's youth, engaging personality, malleability, ambition, and willingness to build at "the American tempo." Speer received commissions for a temporary Party Congress Grounds building in Nuremberg and for the remodelling of the Chancellery in Berlin. Promises of larger commissions quickly followed, and a strong bond was forged between Hitler and Speer, both frustrated architects.

After the death of Troost in 1934, Speer became principal architect to Hitler and, in 1937, *Generalbauinspektor für die Reichshauptstadt* (general supervisor of building for the imperial capital). In these positions, he was in charge of the replanning of Berlin and Nuremberg and either designed new buildings for these cities, or supervised the choice of architects. He also played a part in vast plans to restructure many other German cities and here too often influenced the choice of architects. Many of these plans remained unexecuted, but they were repeatedly displayed as models and photographed for Nazi publications as evidence of the new Reich's will to build and of the creation of a new, National Socialist architecture, one which was designed "for the people," but which also embodied a specifically national and Germanic tradition.<sup>13</sup>

Because Speer worked so closely with Hitler it is still difficult to come to an unbiased decision as to whose ideas were whose. One case in which it is clear that Hitler played a major role was the project for rebuilding Berlin, a plan of which both were very

13 Speer's exact title, and the actual limits of his power, continue to be unclear. According to his *Erinnerungen* (Berlin, 1967), trans. by Richard and Clara Winston as *Inside the Third Reich* (New York, 1970), he was named *Sonderbeauftragter für Bauwesen* in 1936 and *Generalbauinspektor für die Reichshauptstadt* in 1937. Contemporary publications, however, often referred to him as *Generalbauinspektor für das Reich*, or simply as *Generalbauinspektor*. His powers were legally limited to Berlin, but were informally extended in a variety of ways, not least through his influence on Hitler. On the relative roles of Hitler, Speer, and competing architects, see esp., Jost Dülfer, Jochen Thies, and Josef Henke (eds.), *Hitlers Städte: Baupolitik im Dritten Reich. Eine Dokumentation* (Cologne, 1978); Thies, *Architekt der Weltherrschaft. Die 'Endziele' Hitlers* (Düsseldorf, 1976). For additional bibliography, see the preface to the 1985 edition of my *Architecture and Politics*.



proud. The plan envisioned the construction of two great transportation axes which would meet in the Platz der Republik (the former Königsplatz), the site of the recently burned Reichstag. The east/west portion of these axes would join Unter den Linden, the Pariser Platz, and the Charlottenburger Chaussee, in a new grand boulevard reaching out to a new system of ring roads around Berlin. The north/south portion of the axes would be shorter and more ceremonial. It would join the old Lehrter and Anhalter railroad stations (remodelled and part of a revised rail network) by a great street along which would be monumental new administrative buildings for the new Reich. Extensions of the north/south axis, beyond the railroad stations, were also to have joined the ring road. Bridging the lower end of the north/south axis was to be a 400-foot high version of the Arc de Triomphe, which Speer says was Hitler's design. At the head of the axis was to be another giant building, a great domed hall for gatherings of the Nazi faithful.<sup>14</sup>

The domed hall was to be part of a huge complex of buildings encasing the Platz der Republik, which would include a mammoth residence and chancellery for Hitler and administrative buildings built up around the Reichstag, the ruins of which were to be preserved as a memorial. South of the domed hall, which appears in models to have been a version of the United States Capitol, inflated, like the triumphal arch, to gigantic size, were to be new ministries and offices, museums, an opera, and "palaces" for some of the other Nazi leaders. Speer also claimed that Hitler had a hand in the design of the Great Hall, but that he himself was the principal architect of the rest of the scheme. In retrospect, he was most proud of the ways in which the plan would have facilitated transportation. But he also remarked, in one of his post-war efforts to understand his own actions, that at the start of his association with Hitler, "[I] would have sold my soul . . . for the commission to do a great building." These were great buildings indeed, if size is a criterion of greatness: so "great" in fact that

14 Lars Olof Larsson has differentiated the ideas of Hitler and Speer in the replanning of Berlin with considerable success: *Die Neugestaltung der Reichshauptstadt* (Stockholm, 1978). For a discussion of the historical context of the Berlin plan, see Lane, "The Berlin Congress Hall, 1955–1957," *Perspectives in American History*, I (1984), 131–185.

Speer, and perhaps even Hitler, must have known that they were unbuildable.<sup>15</sup>

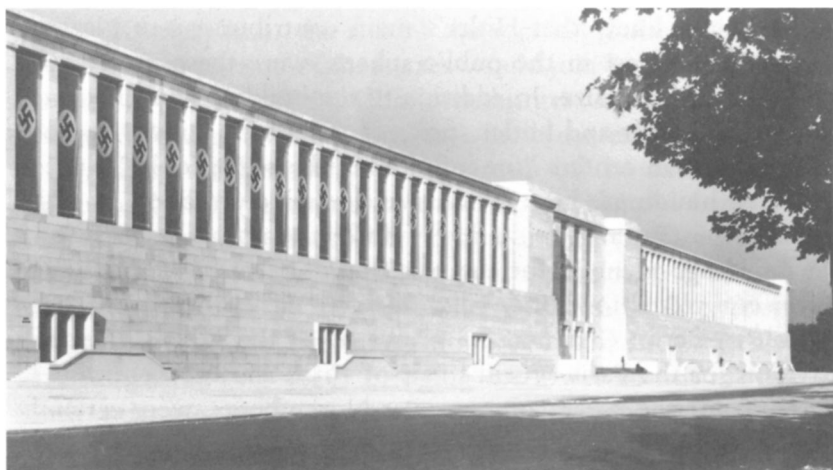
It seems likely that Hitler's main contributions to Nazi architecture, at least in the public sphere, were these projects for buildings of great size. In addition to the buildings on the north/south axis, Speer and Hitler spoke of mile-wide railway stations and new urban centers "for infinite numbers of people." Speer's executed buildings, in contrast, were relatively modest in scale, rather consistent in style, and very different in most respects from the buildings planned for the new Berlin. The buildings which Speer completed for Hitler between 1934 and 1942—a new chancellery in Berlin (but not the giant one of the plan), a German pavilion for the Paris World's Fair of 1937, and the Zeppelinfeld Stadium for the party congresses at Nuremberg—were certainly monumental, but not in the sense of gigantic size (Figs. 5 and 6). All were clad in masonry and were massed symmetrically around exaggeratedly large central entrances. These entrances, and, in the case of the Chancellery, the windows also, were set down close to street level, providing passersby with a sense of visual accessibility unlike most government buildings of the past. Repetitive vertical elements, as at Nuremberg and in the Paris Pavilion, gave a sense of a link to tradition, in that they distantly resembled classical colonnades. At Paris, a simplified cornice also offered some suggestion of a link to the past, as did the rustication on the exterior of the Chancellery. Yet overt and specific references to the classical tradition were rarely present: the garden side of the Chancellery had real columns and capitals, but on the front the columns were so reduced as to appear as only symbols of columns, and this was even more true at Paris and at Nuremberg.<sup>16</sup>

Although he never acknowledged it, Speer, like other architects of the 1930s, was deeply influenced by the Modern Movement. The pared-down, abstract geometric forms of the Nurem-

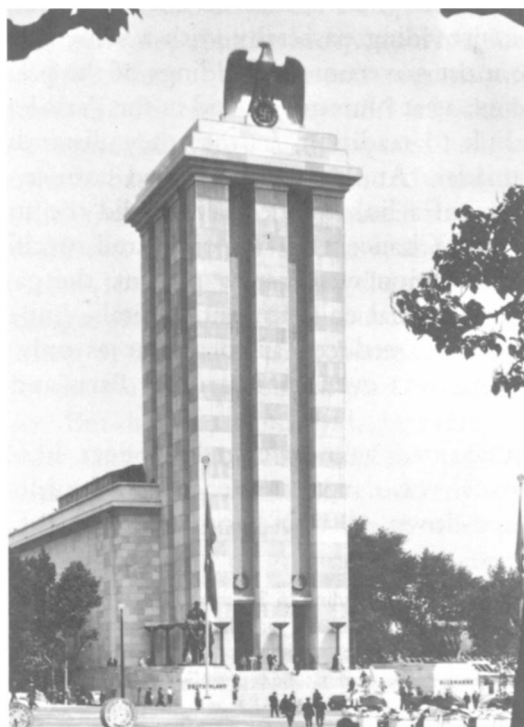
15 Speer, *Third Reich*, 74–75: according to Speer, the idea of the width of the axes was also Hitler's, for whom Paris, in this case, was the main inspiration. *Ibid.*, 78–79, 31.

16 Hitler's taste in private life, as exemplified at the Berghof, inclined toward the rustic: *ibid.*, 46, 86. Hitler, speech at the cornerstone ceremony of the House of German Tourism, June 14, 1938, in Max Domarus (ed.), *Hitler: Reden und Proklamationen* (Würzburg, 1962), I, 873–874.

*Fig. 5* Zeppelinfeld in Nuremberg, by Speer.



*Fig. 6* German Pavilion, Paris World's Fair, 1937, by Speer.



SOURCE: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

berg Party Congress grounds, for example, owe a great deal to the passion for simple geometric forms, without ornament or explicit reference to history, of the avant-garde architects of the 1920s. What set Speer apart from this movement was his insistence on masonry cladding and on axial symmetry in the arrangement of spaces and masses: his apparent rejection of steel and concrete and of asymmetrical arrangements. Buildings like the Zeppelinfeld differed from those of the Modern Movement by a narrow, yet visually significant margin. And despite his own predilection for Baroque and strongly neo-classical motifs in architecture, Hitler was pleased with Speer's buildings. Hitler may have continued to wish for unbuildable versions of the United States Capitol and the Arc de Triomphe, but he came to see the combination of modernity, reference to tradition, monumentality, and accessibility in Speer's executed buildings as uniquely expressive of National Socialist goals.

In retrospect, Speer was most proud of his designs for the party congress grounds at Nuremberg. Here bright flags by day and searchlights by night echoed and dramatized the vertical piers of the grandstand, and framed the complex marching patterns of thousands of Nazi delegates inside. Speer called the vertical columns of the searchlights his "cathedral of light," and wrote, in the first of his memoirs, that this "cathedral" was his "most beautiful architectural concept." How curious that he should have remembered as his favorite great building an ephemeral non-building. But Speer's talent was above all a theatrical talent, and it was this that most fundamentally endeared him to Hitler, who regarded architecture as a stage setting and as instant propaganda.<sup>17</sup>

The overriding interest of the two men in the question of *appearance* in architecture, as opposed to the integrity of materials or to social utility, is underlined by what Speer called the "ruin value" of architecture. In their snowy walks above the Berghof and in their more intimate conferences in Munich, Nuremberg, and Berlin, Speer and Hitler often discussed what Nazi buildings would look like in ruins. On these occasions they also spoke of the ancient empires, of Babylon and Karnak, and of Rome, agreeing that these empires still expressed their power even as their

17 Speer, *Third Reich*, 59.

buildings lay in ruins. Their hope was that the buildings of the Third Reich, when and if that Empire fell, would also express its lasting power. This macabre preoccupation helps to explain their dislike of reinforced concrete as a building material: both believed that it would appear undignified in ruins. Yet Speer nearly always used reinforced concrete, under limestone cladding, because it helped him build at the speed Hitler wanted. And it did look undignified in ruins.<sup>18</sup>

These conversations about the ruins of ancient empires also shed some light on the nature and development of Speer's beliefs about the relationship of architecture and politics. Many of Speer's buildings, insofar as they made reference to the past, appear distantly classicizing. Speer himself, in the first memoir that he published after his release from Spandau, stated that the principal historic inspiration for his work was Greek architecture of the Doric order—this was, he thought, the most noble of past architecture. In addition, he said, Hitler thought, and he himself believed at the time, that the Greeks were the ancestors of the Aryans; if Speer were to attempt a truly Germanic architecture, the Doric was the appropriate model.

There were many sources for this curious idea. Hitler did conflate the Greeks and the Aryans, as some archaeologists had already done early in the century. The association of Greece and German nationalism had long roots in German architecture, especially in Bavaria: it influenced, for example, the patronage of Ludwig I and the work of Leo von Klenze. Speer himself may have picked up the association not from Klenze, but from reading German literature of the Romantic period, which he liked. But Speer was also interested in archaeology. Like other German architects of his time, his training in architectural history was imparted mainly by archaeologists. Of his teachers in that field he especially admired Daniel Krencker, Roman archaeologist and excavator of the Imperial Palace at Trier, and Walter Andrae, assistant in German excavations at Babylon and himself the principal excavator of Assur.<sup>19</sup>

18 *Ibid.*, 56, 154.

19 See Klenze's Walhalla at Regensburg. On varying interpretations of Greek architecture in the nineteenth century, see Peter Collins, *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture* (Montreal, 1967). On Klenze, and on nationalism in German nineteenth-century architecture

There is persuasive visual evidence that Andrae's reconstruction drawings of the main buildings at Assur, the early capital of the Assyrian Empire, formed the most direct influence upon Speer's designs (Figs. 7 and 8).<sup>20</sup> Speer need not have known much ancient history to have realized that Assur was the center of a Semitic empire, and that the peoples who produced these buildings could not by any stretch of the imagination be supposed to have been Aryan or Indo-European. (The two terms were often used interchangeably, even by reputable ancient historians.) Yet in his *Spandau Diaries*, published in 1975 but supposedly written while he was still in prison, Speer admitted the possible importance of Assyrian models as influences on his designs. How are we to explain this contradiction?<sup>21</sup>

It is always wise to regard an architect's explanation of his work with a healthy mistrust, and this principle is even more useful in the case of a man like Speer, who had so many explanations to make. Most architects draw upon a variety of visual sources in a relatively unconscious way. When Speer saw Andrae's drawings he had not yet met Hitler or joined the Nazi Party; hence he had not yet learned to believe that architecture should have some ideological content. Probably he retained from his memories of Andrae's teaching images of an especially old, and newly discovered old, empire, which, by association, suited the idea of "ruin value" in architecture. Probably he did not bother to think through the ideological implications of taking for his

---

more generally, see Thomas Nipperdey, *Gesellschaft, Kultur, Theorie: Gesammelte Aufsätze zur neueren Geschichte* (Göttingen, 1976), 133–173.

Krencker (1874–194?) published, among other works, *Das römische Trier* (Berlin, 1923) and *Vom Kolossalen in der Baukunst* (Berlin, 1926). Andrae (1875–1956) was Krencker's assistant and, therefore, Speer's teacher. He was the author, with Heinrich Schäfer, of the standard volume in the Propyläen Kunstgeschichte series on Egypt and the Near East (*Die Kunst des Alten Orients* [Berlin, 1925]), a book which Speer would certainly have used as a textbook while studying with Andrae. Andrae was also head of the Near Eastern Division of the Berlin Museum, the author of many publications on Assur, and the most influential figure in German Near Eastern archaeology after the death of Robert Koldewey in 1926.

<sup>20</sup> I first developed this thesis in my review of *Inside the Third Reich* in *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, XXXII (1973), 341–346. I sent a copy of my review to Speer; it seems possible that the passage in the *Spandau Diaries* referred to in n. 21 below represents a response to the review.

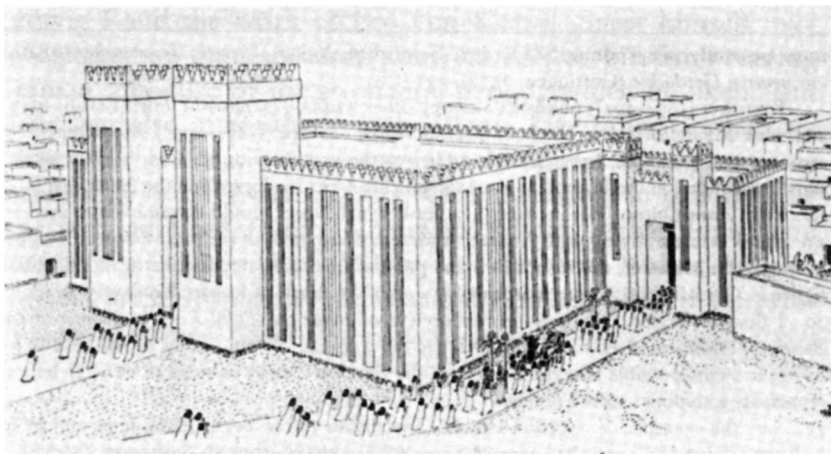
<sup>21</sup> See, for example, V. Gordon Childe, *The Aryans* (New York, 1926); Lane and Leila J. Rupp, *Nazi Ideology before 1933* (Austin, 1978), xv–xvi. Speer, *Spandauer Tagebücher* (Berlin, 1975), trans. by R. and C. Winston as *Spandau: the Secret Diaries* (New York, 1976), entry for March 16, 1949.

Fig. 7 Luitpoldhalle in Nuremberg, by Speer.



SOURCE: Werner Rittich, *Architektur und Bauplastik der Gegenwart* (Berlin, 1938), 27.

Fig. 8 Reconstruction Drawing of the Temple of Tukulti-Ninurta at Assur, 1921.



SOURCE: Walter Andrac, *Der jüngeren Ishtar-Tempel in Assur* (Leipzig, 1935), Fig. 3a.

models the products of a Semitic people. His protestations of admiration for Greek architecture, however, must have been conditioned by some notion of what he thought he ought to say, as a Nazi, and by a belief that this was what Hitler would like to hear. For Hitler's sake, and, one must assume, for his own sake too, Speer was committed to finding some expression for the nationalism of Nazi ideology, as well as for its references to populism. He explicitly rejected the "Germanic" styles of some Nazi architects. In the search for a rationale, it was the link between German, Aryan, and Greek which seemed to fit. Clearly, though, Speer's overriding desire was to create an architecture which looked durable and old.<sup>22</sup>

In this desire Speer was not alone. The concluding irony of this account of Speer's work is that, despite his genuine nationalism, his buildings closely resembled a widespread international movement in architecture in the 1930s. This movement created countless massive stone buildings characterized by repetitive vertical elements which suggested a link to some tradition, but also marked by an absence of ornament which tied them closely to the Modern Movement. Marcello Piacentini, Paul Cret, Charles Holden, Leon Azéma, Giuseppe Vago, Alexei Shchusev, and B. M. Iofan, to mention only a few, shared in an effort to create dignified, formal, yet accessible-looking official buildings in the 1930s and early 1940s. Examples include Cret's Federal Reserve Board Building in Washington, Piacentini's Senate building at the University of Rome, and the Palais de Chaillot of Azéma and others in Paris (Figs. 9, 10, 11). All, like Speer's buildings, are characterized by extreme axiality and centrality, exaggerated emphasis on the apparent thickness of the wall (which was usually masonry over steel and concrete), vertical proportions, and visual accessibility resulting from a formal emphasis on the central entrance. These were all, obviously, public buildings, commissioned by governments, but not by a Nazi government. In the United States this kind of architecture was so widespread that virtually all urban public buildings of the Public Works Administration closely resembled one another, and the buildings of Speer. Yet in the United States no single *Generalbauinspektor* gave direction to

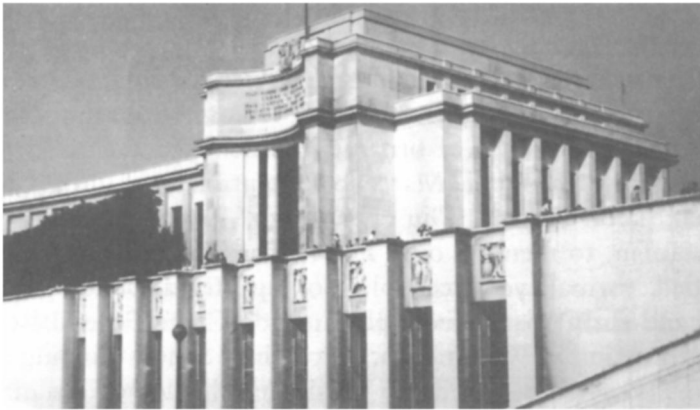
22 Speer, *Third Reich* 11; Albrecht Haupt, *Die älteste Kunst, insbesondere: Die Baukunst der Germanen* (Berlin, 1923); Lane, *Architecture and Politics*, 137, 256, n. 34.



*Fig. 9* Federal Reserve Building, Washington, D.C., by Paul Cret.



*Fig. 10* Palais de Chaillot, Paris, by Leon Azéma and others.



*Fig. 11* Il Rettorato, University of Rome, by Marcello Piacentini.



SOURCE: For Figs. 9, 10, 11—Lane, personal photographic collection.

architects, no Hitler ruled, and both Nazism and Fascism were unfamiliar movements. Government officials described the buildings of the PWA as modern temples to democracy.<sup>23</sup>

Speer's work was part of a more widespread international style than May's. Does this mean that Speer lied about his buildings, or that he and Hitler perpetrated a giant hoax about the ideological content of Nazi architecture? Or was it simply the case that Speer was taking inspiration from other contemporary architects and transforming their ideas to his own ends? I think that none of these statements is true. Speer had not travelled much when he became Hitler's architect, and there is little evidence that he knew of buildings similar to his own outside of Germany. There is also no evidence that he was other than sincere in his belief that he was developing a style which was specifically national socialist.

Instead, I suggest that the resemblances among public buildings in almost every Western country during the 1930s and 1940s were parallel developments, spurred by similar underlying political and social needs. These were depression years in every Western country. Each government felt the need to assure its citizens of its strength and durability, and each wanted a building style which was both modern and somehow old. Each government also appreciated a building style which seemed both universal and national. American, British, French, Italian, and Russian architects doubtless arrived at the rationale for their buildings by a different route than Speer's contorted reasoning about Greeks, Aryans, and ancient empires. But the impetus behind their reasoning, although in no sense Nazi, may nevertheless have resembled Speer's in certain particulars.

Ellenius has argued that, in modern Western societies since the early nineteenth century, the twin forces of nationalism and democracy have had a common effect upon the forms of public art. All Western societies, he writes, attempted in the nineteenth century to find historical references for their public buildings and monuments, references which satisfied the demands of increasing nationalism, yet were, at the same time, intelligible to an increasingly untutored popular audience in an increasingly democratic

23 Charles W. Short and Rudolph Stanley-Brown, *Public Buildings: A Survey of Architecture . . . completed between . . . 1933 and 1939 with the assistance of the Public Works Administration* (Washington, D.C., 1939), 1.

era. The result in architecture, according to Ellenius, was an ever greater abstraction from history: toward the end of the century a number of national monuments suggested their tie to a continuous national identity by massive masonry alone.<sup>24</sup>

Although I see some problems in applying Ellenius' argument to all government-sponsored architecture since the beginning of the nineteenth century, his reasoning helps us understand the public architecture of Western democracies and pseudo-democracies in the depression era. Everywhere, the effort to find a national style, clearly dependent on some tradition, clearly intended for the service of the people and intelligible to them, resulted in the style which has been termed "stripped classicism," but might better be described as "modernized antique." Speer was no less sure that his work was national socialist than was Cret that his was democratic, Piacentini that his was fascist, or Azéma that his was republican. All of these architects were responding to underlying political and social realities, but they were mistaken about the nature of their expression of specific political programs. This conclusion sheds considerable light on the political role of architects in power, and on the difficulties confronting the historian in interpreting the political significance of architecture.<sup>25</sup>

In comparing the careers of May and Speer, I have not offered a complete biography of either man, or a complete account of their works. Rather, I have called attention to certain common themes in the role of architects in public life in the twentieth century, and have suggested problems, and some solutions, in discussing the relationships between architecture and politics. The evidence of these two cases, at least, suggests that architects are not necessarily men of high political principles, or even people who are very intelligent about politics. It is clear that for May and Speer, the building or buildings came first, resulting from a specific creative vision, and the rationales came later and were less important. Underlying both the rationales and the formal vision was, in each case, a deeper guiding idea, which remained

24 Allan Ellenius, *Den offentliga konsten och ideologierna* (Stockholm, 1971).

25 Lane, "Government Buildings in European Capitals 1870-1914," in Hans J. Teuteberg (ed.), *Urbanisierung im 19 und 20. Jahrhundert. Historische und Geographische Aspekte* (Cologne, 1983), 517-560. Giuseppe Vago and the other architects of the League of Nations complex in Geneva must have believed that the best modern national style was also the best expression for a building which would assemble nations together.

relatively inarticulate. May's deepest desire was to build a new society out of the best of the old; Speer's, to preserve the appearance of the old in the service of a new monumental architecture.

Both cases also show (and evidence for this point could easily be multiplied) that, to achieve major commissions in the twentieth century, great power, or the patronage of great power, is necessary. Major architectural commissions in the twentieth century tend to be government buildings, and they tend often to be part of a larger planning process. To achieve the realization of an architect's goals, it would seem almost necessary that he either become a dictator of style himself, or find a dictator as a patron. In the process, he will also almost necessarily become a planner, because of the scale of modern building needs and the nature of government response to them. In short, to carry through large-scale projects, both May and Speer, men of radically differing views of the good society, were altogether willing to set aside the democratic process: to plan on a large scale for people's own good, whether they liked it or not. It is worrying that both were naive about politics, but not about power.

The careers of May and Speer also provide ample evidence of the difficulties confronting historians who seek to interpret the political or ideological content of buildings. Historians cannot necessarily believe what the architect himself has said about his work, or what his patrons say about it either. It is also unwise to infer the political significance of a building or building style from the reactions of its audience: right-wing groups in Frankfurt thought May was a Bolshevik, intent on destroying all tradition, which he was not; his Russian patrons came to believe that he was a Fascist, intent on importing Western capitalist politics into Soviet cities, which he was not. German admirers of Speer's work in the 1930s and 1940s would have been shocked to see its close analogues in France, England, and the United States; Americans are still unwilling to hear the public buildings of the Public Works Administration compared to their counterparts in Germany and Italy.

Two approaches to the question of the political significance of architecture are possible, however. First, one must believe that the architect meant what he said, as did his patrons and audience. Looking at this kind of evidence, one can gauge the short-term political intent and effect of a building or buildings. The state-

ments of patrons and architects as to their intent, and the reactions of their audience, are themselves historical facts, which affect later observers in their own views about the political implications of architecture. Second, one can infer a larger political (and social) significance from the context of the buildings and of the architect's life. The "international style" of the 1930s and 1940s can be seen from this perspective as a product of the effects of the depression on government patronage in the industrialized countries, and also as a response to the long-term problem of relating architecture to history for a nationalist and popular audience. The International Style of the 1920s, in May's version, was the product of the political, economic, and intellectual turmoil specific to the first years of the Weimar Republic, when visionary hopes for a new society were first raised and then dashed. More broadly speaking, May's work was also a part of a modern movement in architecture which, among other things, celebrates the ability of modern technology to serve the needs of all members of society equally. The implications of this set of values are egalitarian and anti-nationalist, but not entirely ahistorical.

In studying the relationships between architecture and politics, historians must be willing to consult every kind of historical evidence: the nature of the creative process at a given historical moment; the public statements of intent by both architect and patron; the buildings themselves; the reactions of the users to both statements and buildings; the context, architectural and political, of the works and the writings; and the fundamental social and political conditions under which both appear. Since architects in power, at least in the twentieth century, seek to please many masters, and since buildings do not speak for themselves, the task is particularly complex. The rewards, however, are correspondingly great, since they include a fuller understanding of all the levels of life and consciousness, from the most public and programmatic, to the most private and irrational.